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ABSTRACT

Although there is abundant theoretical matter concerning the critical role that various interpretive communities play in making meanings of literary texts, most scholars do not take up the matter of the composition of these interpretive groups in their university classrooms. How may the interpretive strategies of groups of students change over the course of a 16-week semester? Education is a matter of fostering change, particularly changes in the skills with which individual students--and groups of students--navigate literary texts and provide useful and illuminating readings. Stanley Fish has suggested that there is no a priori or "correct" reading of a literary text, but that interpretive communities who share a single strategy of reading over time, tend to "agree" on interpretations. A 7-year study examined whether students could be organized to become aware of the interpretive communities to which they belong. Third-year students in a modern fiction course at the University of Louisiana (Lafayette) and at Bowling Green State University (Ohio) were familiarized with 13 different models of critical analysis and wrote 2-page papers describing a viable critical approach to reading the text. They were then randomly selected and put into six collaborative work groups of about five members each and asked to read all the two-page essays written by one another. Finally, each group was asked to create a list of the various claims each member made about the text and corresponding critical approach. Each group shared the list with the class and the various approaches and merits of each were discussed. Findings suggest that collaborative contexts for the interpretation of literature can be an effective way to broaden students' interpretive skills. (NKA)

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Collaborative Learning and Interpretation of Literature

'Now, in my case, I'm writing this just for myself. . . . I'll never have any readers' (1961: 182).
-The Underground Man, Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground,*
Translated by A. R. MacAndrew.

'Through reading and writing we take part in a conversation going on in human beings throughout the world' (1985: 2).
-Kenneth Bruffee, *A Short Course in Writing*

Object and Problem

I suspect that the epigraphs above outline a familiar quandary. Are writing and reading solitary or social acts? And, if in some respects they are a little of both, how do we understand the role that, for example, individual readers play in social contexts? Although there is certainly abundant theoretical matter concerning the critical role that various interpretive communities play in making meanings of literary texts, it's a wonder more scholars don't take up the matter of the composition of these interpretive groups in their university classrooms. Therefore, I became interested in how the interpretive strategies of groups of students may change over the course of a sixteen-week semester. After all, education is a matter of fostering change, in particular changes in the skills with which individual students—and groups of students—navigate literary texts and provide useful and illuminating readings. Certainly Fish's landmark critical work, *Is There a Text in This Class* (1980), raises the matter theoretically, suggesting that there is no *a priori* 'correct' reading of a literary text, but that interpretive communities who share a single strategy of reading, over time, tend to 'agree' on interpretations. If Fish is correct, then it makes little sense to assess

the skills individual university students acquire (or do not acquire) apart from the interpretive communities to which they belong—or see themselves as belonging.

This is precisely the problem I set for myself over the past seven years while teaching a university course in modern fiction comprised of third-year students: How does one go about assessing students' interpretive skills in the contexts of the interpretive communities to which they belong? One way of approaching this might be to assess the interpretive strategies of students entering the class, then organize the class to collaboratively interpret texts, and finally assess changes in students' skills as they exit. But even this approach may be fraught with the precariousness of collaborative learning itself. Early formulations of collaborative learning were focused on what Bruffee calls 'socially destructive authoritarian forms' in England during the Vietnam era, and later in group decision making, for instance, in the medical diagnoses of illnesses (1984: 636). It was only later that teachers became interested in changing the social structures of their classrooms by 'forms of indirect teaching in which the teacher sets the problem and organizes students to work it out collaboratively' (637). Still, pedagogies derived from collaborative learning theory have tended to involve the processes of—and products of—writing assignments, not literary interpretation. Yet as early as 1972 scholars such as Berthoff provide some justification for drawing on collaborative theory for the interpretation of literary texts: 'We need a theory of the imagination, and we will find it implicit in the principles of rhetoric which inform our teaching of language and literature, reading and writing' (647). So for my line of inquiry I decided to draw on Bruffee's theory that through 'skill and partnership' in conversation—as well as 'playing silently ourselves'—students learn all the parts of all the participants in the conversation (639). In my literature classes, could I organize students to

become aware of the interpretive communities to which they belong—and learn new interpretive strategies from members of other interpretive communities."

Methods

Over the past seven years I've taught seven sections of a university course in modern fiction designed for third-year students. Two sections I taught at the University of Louisiana, Lafayette, and the remaining five at Bowling Green State University, in Ohio. Each section enrolls about thirty students, so the total student population involved is about 200. Literary texts students read vary a little, but typically they are expected to read and respond analytically to six novels. Typical ones are Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*, Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Wharton's *House of Mirth*, Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, and Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. I, of course, lecture on each novel, providing historical, biographical, philosophical background, etc. But in addition to this, the first two weeks of the semester students become conceptually familiar with thirteen critical approaches to reading and responding to these works. They also study models of critical analyses, including those in more challenging areas, such as new historicism and deconstruction. The approaches used are listed below:

1) Formal

2) Rhetorical (e.g. based on the theories developed by Wayne Booth)

3) Psychological (of characters, or writer, and/or of reader)

4) Biographical

5) Historical

6) Philosophical

7) Cultural

8) Marxist (especially Cultural-Marxist views)

9) New Historical

10) Feminist

11) Deconstruction

12) Reader-response (typically based on critical reception of a text over time)

13) Mythological / Archetypal

Of course, students are told that the above areas tend to overlap. In addition to other requirements for the course (a term paper and weekly reading quizzes), for each novel students are required to write a two-page paper describing a viable critical approach to reading the text and providing initial support for their claims from the text itself. Then students are randomly selected and put into six collaborative work groups of about five members each, and asked to read all the two-page essays written by one another. Finally, each group is asked to create a list of the various claims each of its members makes about the text and the corresponding critical approach. Each group shares the list with the whole class and the various approaches and merits of each are thoroughly discussed. I then collect the lists of critical claims (about thirty claims on each list), type up a whole list of claims categorized by critical approach, make copies, and pass these back to the students. Below is an example of part of a typical list:

Critical Approaches and Claims in Reading Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*

Formal

-The radically compressed spatial form of the novel in the 'Time Passes' section suggests the absence of human consciousness.

-Etc.

Psychological

James's hatred for his father is Oedipal in nature.

-Etc.

Feminist

-Mrs. Ramsay's being characterized as the 'platform of stability' for her family is typical of a masculine view of women in the Victorian Age.

-Etc.

The procedure described is completed for all six novels. Prior to the final examination for the course, students are once more put into small groups. From all six of their lists of critical claims about all six novels students develop a list of general features of the Modern Period. (I add to their list if they miss something important.) Then, for a portion of the final examination (closed book and notes), students are required to choose one of the general features of the Modern Period—and one of the thirteen critical approaches—and to employ both to write a fully developed essay on one or more of the novels. In this manner, over time, and by observing the natural collaborative processes going on in my classes, I have become familiar with the types and variety of critical approaches chosen by students to respond to literary texts—and how these choices change over a sixteen-week semester.

Results

Over the seven years of teaching the class, I have observed the following typical distribution of critical approaches chosen by students when they first encounter each of the literary texts.

Table 1. Initial distribution of critical approaches chosen by students	
Critical Approach(es)	% of Students
Formal	50%
Psychological (most concern a character)	20%
Feminist	20%
All others	10%

More than anything the distribution likely reflects the sort of interpretive training and 'communities' students have been acculturated to while in secondary schools and lower-level university courses. However, with the obvious emphasis on multicultural readings of literature in secondary education in the United States, it is a bit surprising that more university students do not choose to respond from a cultural or new historical point of view. And if one considers how close a critical approach based on the psychology of a character can be to a formal approach, really about 70% of students are still reading formally. The significant number of feminist readings is no surprise considering that approximately two thirds of my students are female and feminist views have likely been taught in secondary schools a decade or so longer than multicultural or post-structural ones.

While the initial interpretive proclivities of my students is interesting, my project as a whole is to look at the nature of changes in those proclivities—the sorts of interpretive communities they tend to see themselves as belonging to and whether these change over the course. Table 2 displays the same set of critical approaches used throughout the project, but the data in the table is based on critical approaches selected by students to write their essays for the final examination.

Table 2. Distribution of critical approaches chosen by students for the final examination	
Critical Approach(es)	% of Students
Formal	20%
Psychological (of fictional character and author)	20%
Feminist	20%
Cultural and Cultural-Marxist	30%
Deconstruction	5%
All Others	5%

Obviously, I find far fewer students writing formal analyses on the final examinations, and it appears that the bulk of the shift is to responses that are written from cultural and/or cultural-Marxist perspectives. Additionally, the sorts of psychological perspectives students choose are about evenly divided between those that focus on the psychologies of characters and authors of the texts. It is conspicuous that throughout the semester students rarely choose traditional, extrinsic approaches such as historical or philosophical ones. I have to compensate for this by developing final examination questions in these areas. While I have not had the opportunity to interview students concerning their reasons for selecting the critical approaches they do for the final examination, I have to believe that the strong collaborative component in the course plays a significant role in the general redistribution of approaches depicted in Table 2. As Bruffee suggests, work in small groups enables students to see the range of critical approaches available to them and this, reinforced by seeing other students, perhaps even a minority of students, successfully employing these, they gain confidence and tend to employ new approaches. In essence, students initiate themselves in to one or more new interpretive communities during the course of the semester. Of course, one might argue that students may select these other approaches because they feel that the instructor prefers a variety of them (I do, though I do not ever indicate this in the course) or that it is, say, trendy to employ cultural or deconstructive

approaches, but I do not think this is entirely the case. Students are unlikely to jeopardize their grades by trying new approaches unless they feel confident that they can employ them with skill and success. One might also argue that student essays from perspectives new to them may not be as competent as those from approaches they are familiar with in secondary schools and their first two years in the university. Based on my evaluation of the final essays, this is simply not the case, either.

Based on my observations of this one particular course over the past seven years, I think collaborative contexts for the interpretation of literature can be an effective way to broaden students' interpretive skills if 1) the collaborative tasks are clearly defined, 2) students are given the detailed results of the tasks, and 3) assessment of student performance is based on the collaborative work undertaken (e.g. designing the final examination such that students can choose an approach to use). Certainly, student collaboration is never a substitute for the teacher's responsibility to put students in possession of crucial materials (e.g., witness my needing to emphasize historical and philosophical material). But if education is about change, then certainly, as Bruffee points out, the 'skill and partnership' students develop among themselves can play one important role in their lives and growth as readers of literature.

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